DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LOU LANTNER, EPRT TEAM LEADER, 3RD BRIGADE, 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION, MAHMUDIYAH SUBJECT: MAHMUDIYAH PRT PROGRESS MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 9:00 A.M. EST DATE: TUESDAY, JANUARY 8, 2008

MR. LANTNER: Well, again, I'd like to say hello to everyone. My name is Lou Lantner, and for the past, almost nine months I've been the team leader of an embedded provincial reconstruction team, that's EPRT, here in the Baghdad Province. We are south of the city of Baghdad by quite a bit and I have a decentralized team.

I have a command center here with the -- we're co-located with the brigade commander of the 3rd 101, the Rakkasans, and I have several people in Mahmudiyah, which is the center of government, the Qada, or the region. And I have three people in Yusufiyah, which is the center of the agricultural industry, as it were. We're in the process of working with people to build up the government and get it functioning at the local level, to get the agricultural back to where it was five or 10 years ago where it was a booming industry and people were well fed and there was a lot of commerce going on. I've only been doing this for nine months. I've learned a lot. I'm a Navy veteran. I was on active duty for three years, and in the Reserves for 21. And I've had experience with the military and I've done a lot of work at the Pentagon. I worked for the Department of Defense for 10 years, but I've never been embedded with the Army.

This has been a thrilling experience for me and quite a different experience, something I hadn't had before. But for 30 or so years before this I had a career in the federal government in various capacities. I just mentioned I worked for the Department of Defense for 10 years, and I worked for NOAA, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for five years in the Department of Commerce. And I've worked for the Voice of America, which is America's overseas broadcaster. And I've worked for the DOA for about 10 years in management.

While I was doing foreign travel for DOA, I really grew to like the experience and I like working with people in different cultures. And when the opportunity opened up for going to work for the State Department, I jumped at it. And it took a year to qualify and I

became a public affairs officer. I served for three-and-a-half years in West Africa in the country of Niger as the public affairs officer at the U.S. Embassy. And then I served for three years at our embassy in Hanoi, Vietnam. I also had a smaller operation at the consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. And then the opportunity came to take part in this exciting experiment, really, of joining the Department of State, Department of Defense, USAID together -- representatives of all three groups together, on a team, living with the Army and working to help people in our area.

Our area is a couple hundred square miles. We identify moderates. We identify government leaders. And sometimes it's not as -- identifying government leaders is not as easy as it sounds. We try to get local government working -- get people in the government, at the local level, to connect with their constituents, to connect with the representatives of the ministries so that when a water project, or an education project, or a health project needs to get done, and the people at the local level want to see it get done, we will help them work it up through the chain.

I realize I'm probably talking to people who know a lot about how Iraq works right now, and how it may not be working right now, but it's possible some people -- some of the people with us today don't know any of that so I'm going to try to keep my comments at a level where I'll be talking to everyone, a wide variance in the audience, I'll try to keep everyone satisfied at the same time.

So that's my opening statement and I believe now you may have some questions for me, is that correct?

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir, we do. We've got a few folks on line and we'll check and see if anyone else has joined us, but David Axe was first on line with us. And so David, why don't you get us started. Q I'm afraid I can't, Jack. I'm a little bit out of practice here. I would prefer if you come back to me at the end. I don't have questions right now.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sure. No problem.

Andrew, how about you?

Q Yeah, Mr. Lantner, Andrew Lubin here from the Military Observer. Thank you for taking the time to speak to us today.

Can you talk to us about the microgrants? (Inaudible) -- you provided about 128 different microgrants. Can you tell us what kind of businesses you're invested in or that the people of Mahmoudiyah are starting to open up?

MR. LANTNER: Okay. You're coming in broken, but I believe it's readable. You want me to talk about microgrants and how we distribute them. Is that correct?

Q No, sir. We know how you're distributing because we've talked to a couple of the EPRTs. We'd like to know what kind of businesses you're helping the local Sunnis and Shi'as open up?

MR. LANTNER: Okay, good -- it was clearer that time, thank you.

We are working in an area that is primarily agricultural, and we find that a small amount of money can go a long way. So we have veterinarians, for example -- we probably have more than 3,000 veterinarians in our area. And veterinarians, as it turns out -- and this came as a surprise to me -- are crucial to the agricultural industry at all levels, whether it's a small farmer, whether you have a feed mill, whether you are raising poultry or livestock -- it's more obvious there, but also in terms of health care for the -- whatever, the animals you might be raising, or even genetically-modified crops, the whole -- the whole gamut.

So we have maybe five -- that's zero five -- veterinarians, Iraqi veterinarians practicing now, where at one time there were more than 3,000. Well, it turns out that you can get a starter kit -- a kit of tools, which is instruments for a veterinarian to get that person -- and there are men and women in this profession, back in business. So even if they are in a location where they've never lived before, even if they have no possessions and all their equipment is -- (audio break) -- for a small amount, 1 (thousand dollars) to $2,000, a relatively small amount of money, we can get them back. And we're working on that.

We're working with people who want to go into agriculture again. These might be farmers who have absolutely no tools; they may have the land but they have no tools. We're giving them money to buy tools. We're very interested in the CLCs, Concerned Local Citizens. These are people who have been screened -- Iraqis who have been screened and now have security-related jobs, mostly at check-points along roads. And that's one reason -- with the growth of the CLC corps, that's one reason security has become much better, and we're maintaining the gains that we've made in the past few months by having CLCs and having check-points.

Well, a person can only be a CLC for three or six months, and then we want to see that person transition into a job. So we might put that person through a vocational tech, or we could give that person a grant to get that person started. And whether he's going to open up a coffee shop, or a typical small business, or whether he's going to be a farmer, or whatever profession that person would like to go into, again1 (thousand dollars) or $2,000. We can give grants up to $2,500. It's possible to give grants more than that but we, so far, have limited ourselves to $2,500.

So we see people doing -- one of our popular pieces of paper that we've produced, we have a one-pager on a person who has opened up a juice bar in Mahmudiyah. He has the orange juice -- he has the orange squeezer, and he has, like a mixer, I think a waring blender, and he has other paraphernalia.

And, for $2,000 he has -- and he has stools and he has a counter and he has an attractive glass front, and the guy is doing a business, he really is. He needed the small amount only to get started, now he's on his own. And that's really caught the imagination of quite a few people. So those are some examples.

Q Where's -- is he in the center of the city by the big market, or where is he?

MR. LANTNER: In Mahmudiyah, as with other cities, Yusufiyah, Latifiyah, there is a main street where it might go for maybe a half a mile, where you have many stores. I mean, when I say stores, don't -- because people shouldn't be thinking of a strip mall in the United States. It doesn't look like that, but these are stalls, maybe is a better word for it --

Q Yeah, I appreciate it. No, I've been to Mahmudiyah --

MR. LANTNER: -- and people are selling --

Q Yeah, I've been to the city and trying to visualize where he is.

MR. LANTNER: In the area where the market is.

Q Okay, great. Thank you very much.

MR. LANTNER: You'll see -- you'll see butchers slaughtering meat and you'll see people selling produce and you'll see tailors and you'll see now a juice bar.

Q Oh, tremendous. Good work. Thank you very much.

MR. LANTNER: Sure.

MR. HOLT: And Matt.

Q Hi, -- (audio difficulty). This is Matt Armstrong from Mountain Runner.

Thinking of your public diplomacy hat -- or wearing your public diplomacy hat, I have a couple of questions. Do the PRTs contribute to denying ideological support for terrorists and insurgents? If so, why? And if not, why not? And then, in your opinion, as an experienced public diplomacy professional, would the PRTs be more, or less, or the same, effective as a clearly military-led effort?

MR. LANTNER: Okay, Matt, I'm going to have to ask you just to repeat a little bit about -- from the first one. You want to know if political ideology is part of our selection process, is that it?

Q No, no. Do PRTs contribute to denying ideological support for terrorists and insurgents?

MR. LANTNER: Oh, if we deny political support for terrorists or insurgents --

Q Yeah. If the operations of PRTs contributes to denying support, recruiting moral support, also performs -- (audio difficulty) --

MR. LANTNER: Okay. I got it -- I got it, thank you. Again, you're coming in broken but it's partly -- it's mostly readable.

We have a group -- and many people who are familiar with the military know these terms, Information Operations and SIOPs. These two groups, totally military -- at least in this brigade and the other brigade that I've served with, they are the ones really who, if anyone were to deny political support for particular groups -- what I do in my EPRT, we try not to talk politics. We talk economic development and we talk good governance. And we try to not discuss differences among tribes, differences among political parties. We know they exist. We try to stay up, as much as we can, on what facts are available, but I do not -- repeat, do not -- get into that with people I do business with.

As people here are very prone to say, that is out of my lane. And I find -- and I support it being out of my lane because it would not be productive for me. I think of a triangle, with the base of the triangle being security, and the two legs of the triangle -- one being governance and the other being economic development. Well, the Army is totally -- well, in some cases it would be the Marines too, but being embedded with this brigade in this AO area of operations the Army is fully 100 percent responsible for security. And when it comes to the two legs, economics as well as good governance, I have -- my team has a good part of the responsibility for advancing those. And I don't find talking political ideology helpful at all.

Now, I will say --

Q Do you think that --

(Cross talk)

MR. LANTNER: Say again, please? Q Do you think that your efforts on the economic and good governance contribute to the security situation?

MR. LANTNER: Contribute to what? Repeat your last few words, please. Contribute to what?

Q By discussing the economic situation, by improving the economic situation, by improving and discussing the issues of governance and rule of law, are you then implicitly denying support for insurgent and terrorist activity?

MR. LANTNER: Absolutely. I should hope so, because terrorists are terrorists. You know, it's okay to have differences of opinion, and that's a good political system will

allow for that, and we would encourage that, under good governance, to have what in the United States we call town hall meetings, but that concept is not here yet. But it's -- very rarely do you have real discussions. Usually there are a set of speeches which probably go right past one another. But I agree with that 100 percent.

You had a second part to the question, and I'm sorry that I -- what was the second part?

Q In your opinion, as an experienced public diplomacy professional, would the PRTs be more, or less, or have the same effectiveness if they were clearly military-led, instead of having a civilian as yourself?

MR. LANTNER: Oh. (Laughs). Well, I'll tell you, the answer to that, emphatic no. And I'll even add to the emphatic no. In my dream world I would like to see not only a totally civilian EPRT, but I would like to see people who don't have to wear the body armor and don't have to wear -- don't have to be accompanied by armed patrols.

Right now, of the nine people on my EPRT, four of us are civilians and five are -- one is a regular Army officer and the other three are Reservists. And the Army people, be they regulars or Reserves, or National Guard, always are in uniform, of course, and they are also always armed. And I find that, in my experience -- and here's where some of this is so new to me, but in public diplomacy it's a little off-putting to sit down with someone and try to have a conversation when we, the Americans, are armed, and visibly armed, and the other people are not.

I think we could -- but, again, I'm not questioning the need for that at this point because security is not where it would have to be to get us to that state. But I would hope the end state would be all civilian and all natural, so to speak. Thank you.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, did anybody else join us? Q Jarred Fishman's on.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jarred, why don't you go ahead.

Q Hi, sir. If you could talk a little bit more to the atmospherics of what you're seeing on the ground? We see the numbers -- (inaudible) -- but perhaps you could talk a little bit to your interactions with the Iraqis.

Is there an increased professionalism in the different city councils? Are there more experts coming forward who can help you get these plans underway in the entrepreneurial spirit within the population? If you could just talk to actual -- how the Iraqis have been improving, if they are improving since you've been there and what you're seeing in your daily working relationship with them?

MR. LANTNER: Okay, I'll try to attack that one. I will also mention -- just to remind everyone, and I realize some of you are well aware of this, but others may not be -- I mentioned a few minutes ago that our area is probably 200 square miles, and I can speak to these 200 square miles. Iraq is a huge country so what I'm talking to now is a small part of the entire country. Whether or not what I am about to say can be applied against the rest of the country I don't know, and the answer is probably, can't be, because other parts of the country are quite different.

But here's what I know about the area in which I operate.

We are discovering people out there who, you might say, have been lying low for a while, for a few years, because it wasn't safe to come out. When terrorists are running around killing people -- I mean, this is real terrorism, real killing people, those people who were brave enough and had the wherewithal, the means to stay, found it a lot safer to lie low. And not only safer, people who wanted to step out and say something, they really couldn't, there were no -- there was no means to do that.

So, yes, we are finding people who are talented, who can contribute and who want to contribute, because now the security is at a point where they feel somewhat safe. They can come to an area which, CMOC, C-MOC, they can come to our C-MOC, which is usually accessible from an open road but it's adjacent to one of our forward operating bases, one of our FOBs.

So they can enter the C-MOC and we will meet them there. We can talk and then they can go back on their way. We'll have a meeting with a council chair who doesn't really want to be seen -- he doesn't want to see Americans come to his office because when we travel, we have to travel in a minimum of four Humvees. And each Humvee has a crew of a minimum of three, and usually four armed people. And when we dismount from the Humvees, the three or four crew stay positioned outside the building we're in to provide a cordon of security.

And people, whether it's a council chair, or whether he or she is a small business person, or even a factory manager, they don't feel comfortable with an American presence -- an obvious American presence like that. So they come to our C-MOC, which is a little more -- a little more private, not as obvious. So, yes, we are discovering some people who are out there.

I'll tell you one thing, part of the heart rending portion of my experience here is we become more and more aware of people who have been killed -- middle managers, local politicians, people who were simply in one tribe and another tribe wanted more power.

It's not all related to the war. A lot of this are family feuds, tribal feuds that have been going on for years.

We were at a state-owned enterprise last week -- a very large metal and bike -- it's called a metal and bicycle factory, and they have some people there who can do good work, and they have machinery which they have maintained. And I don't know how they've been able to maintain it so well. Now they're running at very low capacity, and one of our goals is to help them get more equipment and get more trained workers, but that's another story.

I asked the fellow who was showing us the power generation system for the factory, since it consists of two generators, two very large generators. He seemed to have a real good working knowledge of these generators. He'd been at the factory since 1981, and I said to him, when you're not here who can operate these generators and make sure power continues to flow? And he said, no one.

And that's when tears came to his eyes and he said he once had a crew of four, plus himself, and the other four -- one fled the country and is now in Syria, the other three were killed. And this is a state-owned enterprise. And the numbers are similar in private enterprises. So we have a lot of rebuilding to do -- the Iraqis have a lot of rebuilding to do and we're here to help them.

That's my response.

MR. HOLT: Okay, anyone else join us?

Q Yes, sir, I have a question.

MR. HOLT: Okay, go ahead. Who is this?

Q Farook Ahmed, Institute for the Study of War.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Farook, go ahead.

Q Yes, I'd like to know about the CLCs that you touched on. I'd like to know if you have any information on the numbers of those concerned local citizens and the sectarian breakdown?

MR. LANTNER: I have some numbers but I really can't discuss that here. I will say that we are limited -- the Army has put a cap -- our division commander has put a cap on the number of CLCs we can have. And that's good for us in that we are trying to transition a number of CLCs and these people, I refer to them as a CLC, into other jobs. But I really can't go into the numbers right here.

Q Okay, thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay, anyone else? David, have you come up with a question yet?

Q Yeah, sure. Hi, this is David Axe. I would like to get you to talk about your work onto local banking infrastructure. That must be challenging in light of social and religious moray related to banking, no? MR. LANTNER: It would be challenging if I were working on it. I went to a banking conference --

Q (Inaudible)

MR. LANTNER: Well, no, I'm not, unfortunately. I went to a banking conference three or four weeks ago at the U.S. embassy, and we had representatives from different PRTs around the country. And to make a long story short, there is one state-owned bank in our area of operations. And we don't have the interest yet, of the bankers, to work with us or help -- allow us to assist them.

There are American experts in the area. Not only American experts, the World Bank has some people, two of whom happen to be American, but there are other -- several other people who are other nationalities working for the World Bank. People are anxious to help. But they're not ready for us yet.

One thing that we've -- I was told would have to be done, is that the banks would have to develop computerized systems to allow for electronic transfers. Some of the banks today still have manual ledgers and that just -- you know, they just can't keep up with the demands of a growing economy. And we want to help them transition to the right software -- they can talk to each other electronically, have ATM machines and whatnot, but in our sector they're just not there yet.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anyone else?

Q I've got a follow-up, Jack.

MR. HOLT: Okay, go ahead. Andrew, is that you?

Q Yes, Mr. Lantner, Andrew Lubin again.

On the subject of how much to combine both the metal and bicycle factory, and the banks, what's the power situation there? Do you have enough power coming into the grid now where you can -- where you can build factories and yet keep the lights on full-time?

MR. LANTNER: That's an excellent question, because -- well, no matter what we do, whether it's farmers, or a metal factory, or any other enterprise, you need clean water and you need electricity. And they have to be dependable.

Now the metal factory does not have dependable electricity even from its own generators. It was ahead of the game in that it had generators before the war. It's always had generators, but getting fuel for the generators is a challenge. And it's not that there's no fuel available in Baghdad, it's just that getting fuel delivered, and -- there's just quite a few bureaucratic problems we have to solve, which we're working with them, again, whether they're state-owned enterprises or whether they're privately-owned enterprises, we're still working with them to try to do that.

We're also providing newer generators that not only run better but put out more power. So now having said that, the factories are operating at such a low percentage of capacity that, in the case of the metal factory, the generators that it has are, in fact, sufficient for now but when we assist them in gearing up they'll need different generators.

One of our goals as an EPRT is to get the Iraqi government to fund some of these major purchases, if not all these major purchases, particularly for state-owned enterprises. Whether or not the Army -- U.S. Army will grant the, you know, the generators to the factory, or whether the Iraqi government will pay for the generators is yet to be determined, but they will need new generators very soon.

Q Wouldn't that shut -- (audio difficulty) -- the Army Corps of Engineers is telling us that they're increasing power on a regular basis. Is that working-- (audio difficulty) -- in towns or is that mostly staying in Baghdad now?

MR. LANTNER: Okay, that was broken. Do you want to know the involvement of the Army Corps of Engineers in this, is that it?

Q No, not exactly, sir. No, the Army Corps of Engineers keeps putting out data that they're increasing the power generation regularly. Is that making it into your sector? I mean, if not, is that why you're still on generators?

MR. LANTNER: So. Well, that's true. The hours per day of electricity, on average, is increasing in our sector. But that really -- when you have a large factory -- let me give you an example: There's a biscuit factory in town which is not operating right now. It's only economically -- excuse me, it's optimal for that factory to work 18 hours a day. But when they work, they need dependable electricity so you can't have outages and still work that 18-hour shift.

In fact, even if you worked an eight-hour shift, if you have outages in some industries it just doesn't work. And for anyone to have a guaranteed eight hours of electricity, you really need a generator, because maybe the average number of hours of electricity has increased from six to seven. Now that's pretty good -- you know, you can always play with the numbers, on a percentage basis that's pretty good.

If you're a family with a small house, a lot would depend, as far as you're concerned, on what hours of the day those hours of electricity are available. So, I mean, there are many variables here but also it'd be interesting to note those are consecutive

hours, and I'm sure they're not. But the averages can, say, increased from six to seven, still not nearly enough to reliably run a large factory.

(END OF AVAILABLE AUDIO.)

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